



Woking Borough Council

External Communications Strategy

2004 - 2007

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Woking Borough Council External Communication Strategy

Introduction

The Council provides a wide range of services to over 100,000 customers. In delivering these services, it seeks to represent the interests of all our communities and the democratic process provides direct accountability to the electorate. An important aspect of local accountability is the degree of understanding that people have of the Council's actions, the decisions it takes and the reasons for them. This understanding can only be built through effective communication and consultation.

The purpose of this document is to outline the Council's approach to communication and consultation in these areas. The strategy should be read in conjunction with the External Communications Action Plan.

The National Context

MORI research consistently shows that local Councils are perceived as the worst communicators in the public sector. The same body of research also shows:

- Local residents want more information from their local authority;
- There is a clear correlation between knowledge of what a Council provides and approval for its actions.

The Local Picture

The Council's own survey of resident satisfaction and awareness conducted between September and November 2000 showed some 72% of residents were either very or fairly satisfied with the way the Council does its job. However, a survey of whether residents feel they are kept informed has not been carried out since 1994 when only 54% of people felt that they were kept informed. In addition, outside of a limited amount of best value work, businesses, visitors and partners generally have not been surveyed to assess their perception.

Research

In order to establish the elements of this strategy, two bodies of work were used. The main element is the External Communications Audit carried out in the early part of 2004 by a consultancy under the guidelines of the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) Connecting Communities initiative. Secondly, some of the outcomes from Council's Comprehensive Performance Assessment 2003/4 have used to help form the strategy and action plan.

Objectives, Principles and Outcomes

The corporate external communications strategy aims to underpin the improvement of services and support the Council's vision to become an excellent organisation. The objectives of the strategy are:

- To better inform Woking residents about the services and service standards they can expect from their council.
- To increase the take-up of Council services, especially by those people who need them most.
- To promote understanding of and commitment to the aims of the Community Strategy.
- To listen to and act on residents' concerns wherever possible.
- To promote Woking's achievements and attractions (the Borough and the Council) to key opinion formers at regional and national level, in order to promote civic pride and sustain high morale within the Council.

The principles behind the strategy are:

- To be open and honest at all times.
- To communicate in a cost effective, sustainable way.
- To reach people through their preferred channels with interesting, accessible information.

In addition to the strategy, an action plan has been developed with the aim of achieving the following outcomes:

- A better informed local population which understands and is more satisfied with what the Council is doing for them.
- A local population that considers Woking to be a 'listening council'.
- High recognition rates for key council publications.
- As a result of effective marketing, improved take up of the services people need to meet the aspirations of the Community Strategy.
- A stronger community spirit in Woking.
- A stronger profile for Woking in the regional and national media.
- Demonstrable evidence that consultation has influenced policymaking and policy outcomes.

Key Stakeholders

The Council's commitment to providing high quality services is underpinned by the need to ensure that customer service is at the heart of all Council business. The following table sets out the Council's main external stakeholders and the key communications issues.

The stakeholders	Key issues to evaluate
All stakeholders	Branding and reputation; awareness of key messages. Involvement in key issues such as the community strategy, neighbourhood renewal, etc
Customers and Citizens (including hard to reach groups)	Two-way communications and consultation including preferred sources of information, accessibility of information, contact with the Council by telephone, letter, email and face-to-face and mechanisms for effective consultation
The media (national, regional, local, specialist and ethnic minority media)	Reputation; awareness of key messages and ways to increase positive coverage in the media
Partners (members of the Local Strategic Partnership, voluntary groups, religious groups, recipients of Council grants etc)	Branding and reputation; awareness of key messages; effective two-way communications and consultation
Businesses	Reputation; awareness of key messages; contact with the Council; two-way communications and consultation
National opinion formers (civil servants, ministers, MPs, think tanks, academics and national organisations such as Audit Commission, LGA and IDeA)	Reputation
Supplier/Partners/Contractors	Branding and reputation; ensuring good customer communications

Responsibility for the Communications Function

The Executive Portfolio Holder and the Management Team are responsible for driving the External Communications Strategy by actively, and demonstrably, applying its principles to all aspects of the Council's work.

Detailed implementation is provided via a cross-council communications group chaired by the Chief Executive. The Group includes a nominated communications champion from each service area (and the professional communications/marketing staff in housing and community services). The remit of this group is to:

- Oversee the implementation of the Council's communications strategy
- Plan and share information about key communications activities
- Act as a conduit for good news stories from the service areas
- Develop and support guidance and protocols to support consistent communication across service areas
- Protect and provide guidance on corporate identity.

It is the responsibility of the nominated key communications champions for each service area to liaise with the Marketing Communications team. This person is responsible for leading on service planning on communications and attending the cross-service communications group.

It is the responsibility of Services Heads to:

- Ensure that communications is considered systematically as part of the annual business planning round.
- Run a rolling training programme for key managers on communications awareness including:
 - Briefing on the Council's communications strategy and key messages
 - Media awareness training and protocols
 - Importance of the Council's corporate identity guidelines
 - Basic marketing techniques
 - Good practice on consultation
- Ensure a line of accountability between the Marketing Communications Manager and communications staff in Housing and Community services. The Marketing Communications Manager has an input into their work plans and provides support on professional development for these officers.

Resources

The resources base is made up of two specific elements - people and finances.

People

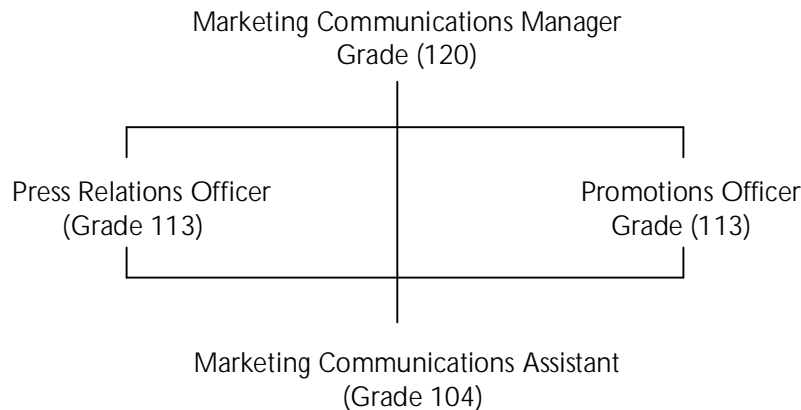
The central communications team

The Council has been fortunate to have a very hard-working Marketing Communications team, held in high esteem by most officers and members. This has been emphasised by the number of communication awards the team has won over a number of years.

Many functions, such as internal communications and various responsibilities for electronic communications, have been added into the team's job descriptions over the past few years. At the same time, the Council has taken a more active interest in good communication across the board. This has led to more work for the team and as result the team has been stretched too thin. The situation depends on a high level of commitment and much hard work by the team, but it is not sustainable. Part of the problem also lies with the Council's lack of focus. There are too many priorities and too many issues to communicate.

Action plan item 2b.

In addition, it was decided to restructure the team to accommodate these increasing pressures and to allow the Marketing Communications Manager to implement the action plan. The new structure is as follows:



External Contract

In order to support the work of the in-house team and to provide flexibility in times of demand peaks and troughs, an external contract is operated, providing a full range of communication support for the Council.

The External Communications Audit considered that:

- The outsourced contract should be competitively tendered
- The Council considers bringing a proportion of the work in-house, equivalent to at least two posts, to cover the added demands of new functions such as internal communications, electronic communications (intranet and web) and greater support for service area communications (campaigns and training).
- The Council needs to ensure a reasonable budget is agreed at the beginning of the year to encompass all projects, based on more systematic planning with service heads.

The current contract ends on 31 December 2004 and, based on the recommendations in the audit, the new contract will be made up of the following elements:

- Design and production of the Woking Magazine
- Design and production of Streetwise Magazine
- Design and production of the A – Z of Services
- A call-on element to provide a marketing communications service for the larger items that cannot be handled by the in-house team. Examples of these over the last year are Climate Change Strategy, Westfield Tip, "The Big Idea" etc.

Action plan item 2a.

Corporate Identity

The IDeA's Connecting with Communities research found that in areas where residents felt both well informed by the authority and satisfied with its services the Council also projected a strong and consistent brand image.

The Council recognises the importance of presenting itself consistently and professionally to its public and has had a corporate identity comprising logos and corporate typeface (currently Optima) for a number of years. Information about this is available in published form, via the intranet and on CD. Advice on its application is available from Marketing Communications. Since 2002 all new starters have received a training session on the importance of using the corporate identity and using it correctly.

In order to create this strong and consistent brand image, the Council's aims is to:

- Ensure that all material is clearly branded as Woking Borough Council and is in line with the Council's corporate identity guidelines.
- Provide, high production standards, with good design and use of colour and interesting imagery.
- Produce publications in plain English.

The recent audit showed:

- That most material is clearly branded as Woking Borough Council and is in line with the Council's corporate identity guidelines. In comparison with many other councils, there was little evidence of sub-brands or service-specific logos, which is a significant achievement.
- The production standards are high, with good design and use of colour and interesting imagery.
- Most publications are written in relatively plain English although, like most councils, Woking has used jargon in some publications.

The audit suggested some areas for improvements:

- The strapline: **"Working for Woking"** in use in the service plan, should be adopted for all issues. It is considered that it captures the strong sense of community leadership within the Council and also promotes the 'enterprise' message about the Council's business focus.

- Production standards of some communication to be improved. More attention paid to design and layout, less use of clipart images.
- Ensure consistency of style and quality both in corporate and service communications.
- Standard letters to be simplified and written in plainer English
- Develop and implement a policy for producing information in accessible formats. Put procedures.
- Ensure the relevant priorities and/or key messages are clearly stated throughout all communications.

Action plan items 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e, 4a, 4b, 4d and 4e

Accessibility

An essential element of any Communications Strategy should be to ensure the information is accessible to all. Following on from the audit, there is a perceived unwillingness among staff to make material available for hard-to-reach groups. However, the actual delivery is not easy and some officers were reluctant because of the cost/time involved. There are two main accessibility issues:

Language

One of the aims of the Council's Race Equality Scheme is to ensure that services and information are being provided "in the most appropriate and accessible form".

Between November 2003 and May 2004 research was carried out into Woking's Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population. English language skills were found to be relatively good with at least 75% of consultees stating that they can speak, read and write English fluently. However, there are significant minorities who cannot read and write in English. 6% of the sample could not read or write English at all which suggests around 780 individuals from BME communities cannot read or write English at all

In terms of translation, the dominant languages requested were Urdu or Punjabi dialects (34.8%), Chinese (16.9%) and Italian (13.5%.) No other languages that the Council were requested by more than 2.2% of those households that had indicated they required translation.

To ensure best value in communications, further work is required to establish the best methods of communication with the BME community and the appropriate use of translated material.

In addition, the CPA inspection detailed a concern that the website is not accessible for anyone for whom English is not the first language and the Council is committed to changing this.

Action Plan Items 4c, 9a and 10a

Blind or Partially Sighted Customers

There are clear reasons for making information available for blind or partially sighted customers:

... it's fair - People should receive information that is accessible to them. Information enables all of them to make decisions and lead independent lives.

... it's the law - There is now a legal duty to meet the information needs of customers with disabilities following the implementation of Section 21 of the Disability Discrimination Act in October 1999.

... it makes business sense - There are over two million people in the UK with a sight problem. This is a sizeable customer base.

The Council currently provides material in alternative formats (large print, Braille and tape) on request but take up is very low. It is proposed that a policy on the provision of alternative formats should be devised to provide targeted information in the form and style needed by the users and to make it easier for service areas to understand and use. This policy should also consider the need of deaf and hard of hearing customers.

Action plan item 4c

However, the website is an example of good practice in terms of access. Two independent reports that look at the accessibility of local authority websites have placed the Council's site high up in national league tables and at the top of the list in Surrey. This is due to the "easy access" version, which runs alongside the main site.

Media Relations

The Council provides a reactive and proactive media liaison service. A media protocol, setting out key processes/responsibilities for officers and councillors in media handling is currently at draft stage and will be launched and promoted to all staff/councillors following consultation and once approved by the Council.

Media enquiries

The Marketing Communications team is the first point of contact for all journalists (national, local or trade) wanting to know more about the Council's business and chasing a story. Locally, it serves four local papers (combined circulation approx. 234 000), two local radio stations (combined weekly listeners – 889 000) and three regional TV stations. The team handles an average of 50 enquiries/follow-up enquiries a month.

Officers are encouraged to respond direct to the journalist wherever possible although the team provides advice on handling if requested and/or if they think the issue could be sensitive. Occasionally, with controversial/sensitive issues, the team works with the officer to provide a written statement or may offer to deal with the enquiry direct themselves. The team logs all calls and responses on an electronically held media enquiry system, Newsflash. This is a useful tool for members of the team to keep up-to-date with current enquiries and assists accountability by providing the opportunity to review what information has previously been released.

Press releases

The Council issues an average of 110 press releases a year to get important messages and news stories across to the Council's customers. These are primarily targeted at the local audience. Approximately 10-15% of releases are sent to technical/trade press journalists. If the issue is considered to be of national interest, the release is also sent to regional/national media contacts. The Marketing Communications Team coordinates all of the press releases and works hard to be as proactive as possible on news stories. It has recently agreed with the Executive to undertake media planning with the relevant services on priority issues in the Forward Plan of Key Decisions. Barriers appear to still exist at service level in terms of proactive news generation.

Monitoring coverage

The team monitors local press coverage on a weekly basis via the online press cuttings service [Shortcut](#) and acts on behalf of the corporate body/services to correct any serious mistakes or misquotes that might damage the Council's reputation.

Where possible, radio/TV interviews are recorded or obtained from a professional monitoring service if specifically requested although there is normally a charge for the service. However, currently there is no framework for regular and consistent monitoring of this type of coverage.

Media training

Media training is also available for both staff and Members. In addition, Marketing Communications has recently published a range of fact sheets on the Council's intranet including top tips on handling press enquiries.

Film liaison

The Council aims to respond as positively as possible to requests for assistance from film and TV companies for locations in the Borough/permission to film. The Marketing Communications team receives requests for assistance/advice and provides follow-on contacts and advice on potential locations to filmmakers. It is also a member of the local government network set up by Screen South, the film commission for the South of England and works to respond to requests for location information that come in to them.

The recent External Communications Audit found that Woking's team was more efficient than press offices in other councils and statutory bodies, and performed better than most private company press offices.

Action Plan Items 5a to 5d

Printed Communications

The Council produces a variety of published materials ranging from magazines to direct mail-shots and leaflets. To produce targeted material suitable for the range of audiences the Council needs to communicate with and to promote a professional image for the organisation, many of these are professionally copy written (either in-house or via an existing contractual arrangement with a PR consultancy) and managed through to publication (again either in-house or through the contract) using external design and print services.

A proportion of leaflets/flyers are still produced entirely in-house using basic desktop publishing facilities and clip-art depending on services' budgets the purpose of the communication. Increasingly, with improved printing technologies it is now possible to get very cost effective deals with external suppliers, which permit the use of more dynamic design/colour work. As a part of the new Procurement Strategy, the authority needs to consider the way it procures this type of material in the future.

A number of the issues raised under the audit have been discussed under "Corporate Identity".

Magazines

The Woking Magazine

A 20-24-page full colour magazine produced and delivered to most residents and businesses in the Borough three times a year (Easter; autumn; winter issues). It features news on Council and community initiatives, major events and services offered by voluntary groups and other agencies to the people of Woking. There is approximately 4 – 5 pages of advertising per issue, which raises £4 000 - £6 000 per issue. Distribution is via the Woking Review to 40 000 households plus 5 000 copies delivered via mailing lists and information points around the Borough.

Market research into its effectiveness last carried in 2000 with key findings indicating the magazine format was popular with a high recall of receipt (78%).

Action plan items 6a to 6f

Streetwise magazine for tenants

A 12-page full colour magazine produced four times a year and targeted at all tenants and leaseholders in the Borough. It features topics and issues of general concern/interest to the Council's tenants. Market research in 2002 indicated 87% satisfaction ratings among its target audience. Articles are suggested and reviewed by an editorial panel including several Council tenants. Distribution is via direct mail to all tenants and leaseholders.

Leaflets/ Brochures/Direct Mail shots

The Council produces a wide range of quality copy written, designed and printed publicity material adhering to the corporate style. It is tailored to suit the needs of appropriate audiences and to compete effectively for people's attention with material from the commercial sector – but at a cost effective price. Distribution is usually co-ordinated by the service area. Examples include: the Council A-Z of Services; the Performance Plan; Green Pages Environmental Guide; Purple Pages guide to services for older people; visitor guides; key strategy documents (equalities; countryside; leisure); car parks leaflets; tenants handbook etc.

Action plan items 3b, 3c, 3d, 4b, 7a and 11b

Welcome packs

New residents and people thinking of relocating to the Borough can request free welcome packs, which contain comprehensive guides to Woking and all it has to offer. The availability of these packs is advertised via the *Wake Up To Woking* postcard, which is available from the Visitor Information Centre (VIC), and is also sent out by Council Tax colleagues with new bills. They are also supplied to local estate and letting agents for prospective clients.

Posters and Flyers

Produced in support of direct mail or other marketing campaigns – from single copies to larger print runs in a variety of formats from roadside posters to A5 flyers.

Letters / Telephones / E Mails

The Council's Customer Care Code sets standards for the way in which the Council handles its day-to-day contact with its customers and provides guidance to staff on how to deal with various situations.

The style of letters and reports is governed by way of standard templates to ensure quality and consistency. A similar system is currently being devised for e-mails.

The way in which it is expected that the telephone will be answered is detailed in the code. Facilities for monitoring response times, without imposing unnecessary burdensome bureaucracy, are currently being developed. The information currently available is:

- Time taken to answer the telephone and
- Time waiting to see an assistant at the Civic Offices Enquiry Desks

The response rate to the answering of letters and e-mails is dependent on the development of the Contact Management arrangements as they are applied to more and more activities across the Council, in accordance with the agreed Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) Strategy.

Action Plan Item 4d

Advertising

The Council uses advertising as part of the marketing mix to reach its audiences. The preference is to try and obtain free coverage editorially in publications but advertising is recommended/used when this is likely to further raise the profile of the initiative/event.

Marketing Communications work with the Council's print unit to create basic informational adverts i.e. for refuse collection changes and membership of user panels. For more promotional messages, the team co-ordinates external design work to produce a more eye-catching advert. Bookings are currently made either by the service direct or by Marketing Communications on request.

Job vacancy adverts are developed by the services in association with Personnel to a corporate template and placed via an agency.

The response to advertising is rarely formally evaluated by the authority (other than in terms of responses to job adverts) and there are still instances of 'knee jerk' advertising when services are contacted direct by publications and feel pressured into booking space.

Action plan item 6f.

Marketing Campaigns

These are developed by the Council's Marketing Communications team in association with service areas to assist in reaching specific business targets - for example increasing the number of properties available to the Council as lets; increasing take up of a service such as benefits –or encouraging involvement/participation in consultation etc.

The team puts together a recommended campaign plan based on objectives for the service and the intended audience and works with the service to deliver any printed material, displays, media liaison work and web work needed to support the campaign.

There is currently little customer-focused market research prior to development of most campaigns and evaluation of results of the campaign by the service is usually ad hoc.

Displays and Exhibitions

Eye-catching display material supports key messages that the Council needs to get across about its service and initiatives in a variety of locations. Displays are also a useful way to provide simple information to large numbers of people at consultation events or on roadshows.

In-house

Simple, cost effective material is produced in-house either by the Marketing Communications team for the corporate body and services or by Community Services for Leisure Centre or Pool issues. Approximately 40 corporate displays are produced per year. The displays are copy written, supplemented with photography/graphics and then mounted on to foam board by the print room.

Externally produced displays

The team sources external suppliers for large format displays for special events/launches – for example, banners, large format posters etc. and to produce balloons and promotional gifts for special exhibitions including launch events.

Corporate clothing and badges are provided on request for roadshows/staffed displays in the community and are held as a central resource.

Event co-ordination

The Council works to raise its own profile and that of the Borough through a series of events that it either hosts or supports. These range from professional conferences or launching a new facility to running a roadshow or open day, celebrating an award or achievement or providing cultural entertainment. The Marketing Communications team often assists with designing/printing invitations; advice on event planning; loaning corporate clothing and badges; producing display material and producing supporting publicity material. Civic events are co-ordinated by Common Services. Currently, evaluation of events is ad-hoc.

Action plan items 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e, 4b and 4c

E communications

The Council has adopted a strategy set out in its Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) statement for delivering electronically all services that are capable of it, by 2005. This includes the provision of information about all our services and consultation with our customers. The key delivery method for this is via the Council's website – www.woking.gov.uk

Website Development

The Council's website – www.woking.gov.uk - was created in 1996 and now has over 1,600 pages of information on the local area and about Council services.

It regularly receives 8,000 – 9,000 visitors a month and is becoming an increasingly important avenue of communication, in its own right and in support of information/marketing activities.

Since its inception, Marketing Communications has proactively undertaken responsibility for creating, managing and promoting the development of the site. In 2001, to facilitate greater publishing to the site and to encourage a greater sense of ownership of web-based information among services, the team set up a group of web publishers drawn from across the Council. There are currently approximately 12 active publishers working to maintain and add information to the site. Bespoke training on how to publish information to the web is provided for new publishers.

The website's Content Management System provides existing publishers with flexibility in what they can publish. It also provides the platform to encourage services that have not addressed this issue to develop their own web pages.

The site has grown organically over time and there is currently no strategy (and no customer-based research) to lead its development. In the last three years, in the annual national Better Connected Report published by the Society of IT Managers it has consistently scored as a middle of the range content site (categories in this assessment are: promotional, content, content, transactional).

Woking Forum messages

The Forum, accessible from the home page, is a discussion room where anyone who wants to discuss any aspect of life in Woking, including Council services, is welcome to post a message.

Many of the comments relate to specific services on offer. These are monitored by Marketing Communications to decide which of them might need a response. They alert the relevant service provider and work with them to provide a suitably worded message for posting on the site. Responses are posted as soon as possible – the target is within five working days.

Action plan items 10a, 10b, 10c, 11a and 11c

Consultation

The Council's consultation efforts are underpinned by a set of principles and a guide to good practice. In practice, consultation is carried out by individuals in service areas and co-ordinated in an informal way by the Policy and Performance team who also act as a source of advice and knowledge about what consultation is going on around the Council at any one time.

Citizens' Panel

The Council uses a panel of approximately 1400 local citizens that is broadly representative of the borough's population for consultation exercises. This number provides a large enough sample to be representative of the Borough as a whole. The panel is surveyed 3 - 6 times a year to obtain views on a range of issues affecting the community. The panel members are kept up to date on the results of the consultation exercises by way of a Citizens' Panel Newsletter.

Hard to Reach Groups

The Council has a particular focus on better consultation with hard to reach groups. For example, the best value review of older people's services is widely regarded as having been a successful exercise. The Council has established a youth council as part of the Citizens' Panel. And following concerns about reaching the town's Asian community, the Council has appointed a consultant specifically to work on consultation with this group.

Facilitation

The Council has trained a network of individuals across the organisation as facilitators for consensus building, to manage discussions with stakeholders about key issues and inform decision-making. Consensus building has been used to assist in developing the Community and Council's Vision and Values.

As a sign of the quality of the Council's collective consultation efforts, the Council was short-listed in the "Best Consultation Campaigns" Category of the 2003 Institute of Public Relations Local Government Excellence In Communication Awards. It is worth noting that no other district or borough councils were short-listed.

From the audit, whilst there was recognition that the quality of the work was very high there is a perception that the Council doesn't consult enough, or that the outcome is a foregone conclusion. This appears to come from the fact that people who have participated in consultation exercises are not always aware of whether the consultation has made any difference or if the consultation procedures have led to a particular decision.

Action plan items 8a to 8c

Stakeholders

The Council works closely with a wide range of stakeholder groups. The audit found that a sample of stakeholders was overwhelming positive about the Council's approach. Communications are seen as responsive, appropriate and professional, and the Council's image is of an efficient and well-run council. This means that further improvement is based on nuance and subtlety, not major change.

There were mixed views about whether the Council is a good champion for the town and borough. The Council needs to find ways of winning these people over and this is addressed in the action plan item.

The Council needs to address the way that consultation is perceived. Some see consultation as a foregone conclusion and a paper exercise. Focus needs to be given to how the Council communicates the results of consultation and the impact that consultation has had on policy or outcomes. It takes time to shift perceptions like this, especially against a backdrop of public mistrust in public services. Again the Council needs to be more robust in communicating why it has taken a certain decision.

Action plan items 9a and 9b